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## **Autoethnography as a Genre of Qualitative Research: A Journey Inside Out**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I argue that an autobiographical narrative approach is highly suited to educational research. I discuss how a researcher's personal narrative, or autoethnography, can act as a source of privileged knowledge. I further argue that personal experience methods can be used on a variety of topics relevant to teaching and the field of education in order to expand knowledge. Autobiographical narrative is a research genre and a methodology. It offers opportunities to highlight identity construction as it covers various aspects of the narrator's life. In an attempt to contribute to literature based on Muslim women's educational experiences, I have disclosed a series of personal experiences. I have thereby demonstrated the value of autoethnography. When writing an autoethnography, the researcher can develop a deeper understanding of his or her own life. Moreover, reading an autoethnography, one is able to view how others live their lives, which can also contribute to a deeper understanding of life in general. Therefore, autoethnography—whether read or written—has a strong, educational merit.

**Keywords:** autoethnography in educational research, Muslim women, Muslim women in Canada, personal narratives

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## Background

My interest in autoethnography is long-standing and has been reflected in my pursuit of knowledge and education. The research questions I have raised in my post-graduate education have focused on answering personal questions and highlighting personal endeavors.

In 2000, I began my Master's thesis. I explored the ways in which Arab Muslim women are/were portrayed in Western society (e.g., in the media, popular culture, and academic writing). In my doctoral research, I explored the educational experiences of Arab Muslim women immigrants in Canada. Both research endeavors speak to my personal experience and self-realization; both provide glimpses into my own autoethnography. This disclosure of my personal journey has helped me to rediscover myself and experience personal growth. Furthermore, sharing these experiences broadens the reader's knowledge of Arab Muslim women's lives and perceptions. The texts could represent a woman whom the reader had once met, worked with, and/or gone to school with—woman whose lives the reader may not have known a great deal about.

I suggest that an analysis of how my narratives were constructed will show the contributions that autoethnography can make within educational research, particularly within research based on immigrants' experiences. Before I continue, I will highlight the importance of exploring one's own history. Freeman (2004) contends that autoethnography "sometimes serves to bind together more closely the world we live in and the world we study . . . We are surrounded by stories all the time, and many of them are not only fascinating but telling. This is to say [that] we can *learn* from them" (pp. 73-74).

Educating not only others but myself as well is one of many motivations in telling my story. But before I delve into my autoethnography any further I must highlight that for my insider-outsider researcher endeavors the difficulty originates from my concern that I could unintentionally participate in generating more stereotypical images of Arabian society, cultural traditions, and religious practices. I had to find a balance in approaching my research inquiries, goals and objectives, and any significant outcomes.

### How Do I Define Autoethnography?

I agree with the definition of autoethnography used by Vone`che (2001) who defines it as a text that is always written from the retrospective viewpoint of a person interpreting his or her own past; its form and content largely depend upon the author's current preferences and opinions and part of its function is to preserve and remain faithful to the writer's personality (p. 226). At the same time, however, an autobiography will affect its author—to a certain extent, the autobiographer will become the true subject of his or her own narrative (p. 226). In the gathering and telling of "stories," we are gathering "knowledge *from* the past and not necessarily knowledge *about* the past" (Bochner, 2007, p. 203). This is the approach I take in writing my autoethnography and when considering it as a form of knowledge.

The idea of the individual/self-identity, perhaps, is the most basic unit of culture. This also brings to the forefront the definition of culture that I will be using, which is Geertz's (1973) classical definition of culture. Geertz defines culture as "historically transmitted patterns embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (p. 89). This autoethnography demonstrates how narrative inquirers can build a knowledge base without relinquishing respect for the individual voice (Trahar, 2009), which is the researcher's voice in this context. As Heewon Chang (2007) stated, "Autoethnography emphasizes cultural

analysis and interpretation of the researcher's behaviors, thoughts, and experiences in relation to others in society" (p. 1). Chang continues by connecting culture and autoethnography, stating that "an individual culture is an individual version of their group cultures, which they construct in relationship with others" (p. 1). Autoethnography, therefore, should reflect the interconnectivity of self and others. Chang (2008) offers additional insight:

Autoethnography as a conceptual framework for research rests on four foundational assumptions: (1) culture is a group oriented concept by which self is always connected with others; (2) the reading and writing of self-narratives provides a window through which self and others can be examined and understood; (3) telling one's story does not automatically result in the cultural understanding of self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation; and (4) autoethnography is an excellent instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners . . . gain profound understanding of self and others and function more effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds. (p. 13)

This account of autoethnography provides an interesting way to frame my work. I introduce my autoethnography with a technique coined by bell hooks as the "bits and pieces" (hooks, 1988, p. 159) of a personal narrative. This was an empowering experience marked by self-realization. During the writing of an autoethnography one is allowed the opportunity to rethink the past, present, and future. It is a kind of journey—a journey from one moment to the next, from one entry to the next (Cooper, 1991, p. 98). In *Rewriting the Self*, Freeman (1991) suggests that autoethnography is "a process of refiguring the past and in turn *reconfiguring* the self in a way that moves beyond what had existed previously" (as cited in Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004, p.77). Furthermore, this article takes the approach that autobiography is a genre as well as methodology. Thus, autoethnography has theoretical value as well as biographical value.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this section I point to how the autobiography was written—what process was followed. The reconceptualization of curriculum according to Pinar (2004) is "four steps or moments in the method of currere: the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the syncretical. These point to both temporal and cognitive movements in the autobiographical study of educational experience; they suggest the temporal and cognitive modes of relation between knower and known that might characterize the ontological structure of educational experience" (p. 35).

### **What Is There In Messy Personal Experience That Is Useful in Knowledge Development?**

In this article I argue that personal narratives construct useful knowledge for others to read and learn from. In classic fictional narratives, such as Jane Austen's and Virginia Woolf's fiction, young generations of women have also learned about an entire period of history and women's struggle. I further argue that personal experience methods can be used on a variety of topics relevant to teaching and the field of education in order to expand knowledge. I thus argue that autoethnography can be used to educate self and others.

The knowledge produced and reproduced through reading a personal narrative and an autoethnography is what I refer to as a privileged knowledge. I argue that it is a significant form of knowledge because it provides an insider account and analysis of weaved power structures that an outsider cannot dismantle. This makes autoethnography a genre and a way of knowing for the unknown and the rarely spoken of.

As with others' narratives, my personal autoethnography highlights how a personal identity has been shaped and constructed—a revelation that is the result of my decision to search within, to reflect on my experience, and to bring my findings into the present. The culminating point of this process is the reconfiguring of the self. Autoethnography “. . . is a story that simultaneously is about the past, the present, and the process in which both merge; and it is about the future as well, about the future that starts in the very moment the story is told” (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001, p. 250). Welty suggests that autoethnography, like other types of narrative, is never static, but is an inward journey that leads us through time, forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling (as cited in Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p.23).

### **Autoethnography, Gender, and Feminism**

The autoethnography in this article shows how autoethnography interacts and intersects with gender and feminism, which is a trend in some feminist thought. It seems that there is an increasing interest, particularly among feminist researchers Patai (1991) and Reinharz (1992), in life history approaches. Many feminists highlight the need for women to provide their narratives as a means of understanding women's unique and collective experiences—experiences that are central to their lives. Feminists, and female writers in general, have contributed significantly to legitimizing the autobiographical voice and to researching one's personal experiences (Ostriker, 1983). Afshar and Maynard (2000) acknowledge that feminist researchers encourage the sharing of cross-disciplinary techniques in research:

Feminists have utilized approaches emphasizing reminiscence, (auto) biography, narrative, life and oral history, together with qualitative techniques. These are all in-depth methods of social research, which highlight the importance of listening to, recording and understanding women's own descriptions and accounts. (p. 808)

One aspect of my autoethnography is my gendered being, as a woman. “Gender is not an ‘innocent’ social category or an unimportant aspect of our identity. Instead, it may open or close doors in our lives, and limit or broaden our responsibilities to live our lives to the fullest” (Jarviluoma, Moisala, & Vilkkö, 2003, p. 6). Because of the centrality of gender in the construction of my identity, my narratives are not just an undemanding recall of a series of definitive personal incidents; the stories display my quest for knowledge, my “moral individuality through the selection, organization and presentation of personal experience” (Convery, 1999, p. 132).

### **Autoethnography and Culture**

The autobiographies of Middle Eastern women are clearly an important source in studying the social fabric of the culture or topic. Still, for some women, the refusal to expose one's personal life to public consumption remains. For others, the powerful symbolism of breaking the silence, of blurring the lines between public and private, and of writing oneself into history serve as strong motivations for writing their autobiographies (Gocek & Balaghi, 1994, p. 11).

As shown above, I have provided “bits and pieces” of my autobiographical account by contributing aspects of my personal experience, and by sharing my historical and cultural contexts. I have reflected on my cultural context and have discovered that my autobiographical account mirrors my culture. Thus, living in a different land surrounded by different values has not only allowed me to see things from a different perspective but it has also allowed me to discover new aspects of who I am, and to question long-held perspectives:

Living in a new community can present puzzles like those we encounter when walking a new path . . . with the familiar in view, we can move about the place, finding our way by attending to what we already know, being comforted by a new place's familiar features. Also, when travelling a new path, we inevitably confront something different, perhaps it is even a prominent fixture we contact repeatedly . . . If we pursue our drive to understand, we might eventually learn about the situated and distinctive fixture. (Carbaugh, 2001, p. 103)

Being in a new place may awaken some cultural expectations embedded within us. Our new path might make us either abandon our cultural expectations or embrace them.

Bruner (2001) sees autoethnography as a means to reflect one's culture. Freeman (1997) theorizes that narratives do not reflect a culture but, rather, constitute a culture. For Bruner (2001), autoethnography is a means of self-construction—just as it is cultural construction. It is a commitment to a certain set of presuppositions about one's self, one's relation to others, one's view of the world, and one's place in it (Bruner, 2001). Other narrative theorists agree that the "cultural self" emerges from memory reconstructions (Nelson, 2004, p. 87).

Thus, I agree that narratives about the self are culturally and discursively situated and that it is this situatedness, as Bruner (2001) and Feldman (2001) have emphasized, that ensures that we do not fall prey to a kind of autobiographical autism. Simply put, "'my story' can never be wholly mine, alone, because I define and articulate my existence with and among others" (Freeman, 2001, p. 287). In other words, my narratives are not all about me, the narrator, but involve other people who play a role in my lived experiences. Within the autobiography I explain how this process helps me navigate the space between my individual experience and my culture(s). The narrative analysis process as the mechanism of learning is included within each narrative, and I consider the entire process transformative for me and for others who read them. Each narrative shows the tie between intercultural learning experiences and how they contribute to a learning process that is further facilitated through the methodology/process of autoethnography.

The third space I occupy as a Muslim woman is the core of my narrative analysis and autoethnography, which is an interesting point that problematizes the notion of identity and insider/outsider in the following narratives. My endeavor here could be viewed as an attempt to contribute to literature based on Muslim women's educational experiences (Ahmed, 1999; Aslam, 2011; Hamdan, 2009a, 2009b; Zine, 2003). I have disclosed a series of personal experiences represented in the following vignettes, which explain my belief in the value of sharing one's autoethnography. Following these vignettes, I will discuss the value of applying this approach both as a research genre and as a learning mechanism.

### **The Narratives**

(1) I am a Muslim woman who lived in Saudi Arabia during my undergraduate years and moved to Canada to pursue graduate studies. My university years in Canada as a graduate student have provided me with incredible opportunities to develop a critical sense of self, including my articulation of how my personal experiences have shaped my research inquiry. Throughout my schooling in both countries, my gender identity as a woman was being shaped and reshaped. Patriarchy and racism are inherent in the construction of my gendered identity as a Muslim woman. My multifaceted and rich experiences have enabled me to contest dominant perceptions of gender discourse in my home society as well as my stereotyped identity in Canada. I emphasize that, as much as these experiences have been personally challenging, they are also enriching and ultimately exciting. I also maintain that it is a privilege to be a member in both

worlds—the Saudi and the Canadian—which are equally rich and have a lot to offer in terms of one’s personal growth.

(2) Growing up as a Muslim in the Muslim society of Saudi Arabia, I have had opportunities to explore and analyze teachings from the *Quran* and their implications for women from an insider’s perspective. I have also examined them as an outsider who left my country as a young woman to live in Canada, a country with a Muslim minority. This was not my first encounter with Western society and values. During my childhood and adolescence, I lived for a short period in the United States, in the 1980s. In Canada, as a woman, I can pursue the natural sciences and educational research with no restrictions, which is not possible in Saudi Arabia. In Canada, I benefit from having both freedom of speech and action, which is also an immense advantage. When I have periodically returned to Saudi Arabia for short visits with my family, I have paid close attention to the political changes occurring in the Middle East. I have also focused on gender discourses and on Muslim women’s positions in them. During my visits to Saudi Arabia, my interactions with female friends and family members and my observations of how gender ideologies are regulated have motivated me to reflect upon my own personal position. I felt like both an insider and an outsider; I occupied a non-negotiable third space. I observed women’s interactions and responses to the ways they are positioned within the gender discourse in my native society. As an insider, I had experienced many of the same issues that the women faced during my visits. My insider position grants me access to Muslim women’s worlds, but I too am an insider-outsider in Canadian culture. I have lived in Canada since the spring of 1998. While I am a member of the academic discourse in Canada and, therefore, feel like an insider, I also possess a sense of being an outsider because I am an Arab Muslim woman. Thus, engaging in a reflective process has great value. Likewise, I have also explored my outsider position as a woman now living in the West. As hooks (1984) states, “We looked from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both” (p. 9). One cannot separate the two stances because both are potentially enriching. In my conceptual third space, I have the opportunity to explore my narratives from two positions: as an outsider living on the margins and as an insider. My outsider position reconstitutes my discourse and practice.

(3) As a Saudi student I did not perceive the sciences (e.g., physics and math) to be “male” subjects; however, in Saudi Arabia women are not allowed to pursue engineering, law, and some other professions, not only because they are considered men’s fields and seemingly do not suit women’s natures, but also because those fields often require women and men to co-mingle. Amalgamation between the two genders in schools and at work is a huge taboo in Saudi society. Yet, when I came to Canada, I noticed the scarcity of women in fields like physics and engineering. I wondered why this was so. While gender discourse is overt in Saudi society, and is manifested throughout schooling and higher education, in Canadian society the discourse seems more covert.

(4) When writing my autoethnography and reflecting on my schooling experience, I thought about the gender role assigned to young girls in Saudi Arabia. My elementary school experiences were regimented: I had to conform to my teachers’ authority. Elementary school days were full of fearful moments of being caught doing something inappropriate, which was anything other than school work. I have strong memories of formidable teachers I had to obey without question. “There was little or no recognition of the diverse histories of each student, neither of the classrooms, nor of the many thoughts and ideas which infiltrated our minds [as students]” (DeLuca, 1996, p. 143). Teachers in Saudi Arabia’s educational system are usually seen as instruments of the upper administrative level (Al-Manea, 1984), whose role it is to carry out instructions. Thus, teachers were expected to act as they did. Their behaviour was neither accidental nor personal (DeLuca, 1996).

(5) My education in Saudi Arabia was a series of lectures given to girls who were expected to sit in silence with their hands folded. Indeed, silence was a trait for which we gained extra marks. Students sat in rows with the teacher standing at the front of the classroom, lecturing and writing on the board. No one was allowed to leave or speak unless first excused by the teacher. Physical education classes were not a part of my experience and even today are not a part of the public school curriculum in girls' schools. Since sex segregation is pervasive in Saudi society, all my schools were girls' schools. There were—until 2008—many significant differences between boys' and girls' curricula. But even today while boys enjoy physical education classes, the home economics curriculum is limited to girls. From Grades 4 to 9 all girls are enrolled in a home economics class, and in Grades 10 and 11 girls have the option of specializing in one branch of home economics: cooking, sewing, or drawing. Until recently, males took more advanced math and computer classes than females. A smaller portion of the budget was allocated to schools, universities, and colleges for females than for males. Girls' schools were not only separated from boys', in terms of buildings and curriculum, but also in terms of management. Girls' schooling at all levels—elementary, secondary, high school, and post-secondary—remained under the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002, while the education of boys was overseen by the Ministry of Education, which is more prestigious and has more resources and funding—although this has changed in recent years. Until 2002, this was to ensure that women's education did not deviate from the purposes of making women into good wives and mothers, and of preparing them for “acceptable” jobs like teaching and nursing which, men believe, suit women's nature.

(6) As a child and young adult, I fully engaged with my courses in school. I obtained the highest marks in almost all subjects—in arts and sciences alike. I was known as an excellent and highly motivated student. My favourite activity in school was reading about various topics before they were assigned or solving math problems ahead of time, before we discussed them in class. Perhaps I read ahead because the teacher was too slow for me or because that way I had more time to study. Perhaps I needed the challenge of discovering the course content by myself. Certainly, I did not like to be silent. In the early years I was talkative, but as I grew older I chose to be silent for fear of being punished for misbehaving and sent home with the red sheet (of paper) for my parents to sign. A student who argues, analyzes, or discusses is seen as a misbehaving student and, therefore, a problem that should be discussed with the student's parents.

(7) In elementary school, we learned that the world is black/white, Muslim/non-Muslim, and good/evil. I was taught that there was only one answer in the book, which was known by the teacher. I was taught that there were no choices, no options—only one way of doing things. Everything else was deviant and wrong. I had to live with these binaries for a very long time. In Grade 4, like any naive nine-year-old girl, I looked at my teacher with eyes full of hope, with two long black braids, which my mother spent every morning combing and twisting. I sat in the front row of the classroom, sometimes by choice, other times because the teacher told me to—teachers always requested that short students sit in the front rows. I remember Grade 4 when my teacher talked about divorce. She explained to us that if parents divorced, a daughter as young as 9-years-old would be taken to her father's house, while a son at the age of 15 would be given a choice between his mother's or father's custody. I was horrified when my teacher mentioned that this was an Islamic rule. I insisted that she show me in the *Quran* where this rule is mentioned. My teacher took this as a challenge, which was an “unforgivable SIN.” “To pass opinion against the way of the elders, whether it be teacher or parent, according to the *school system*, might fall into the category of *SIN*” (DeLuca, 1996, p. 144). It is not only in school that we are not to challenge a teacher or an elder, but we are not supposed to do that to any authority in society. My teacher furiously demanded, “Why are you disturbed by this decree? Are your parents divorced?” I said,

“No, but what if that happens to me? Do I have to be with my father even if I want to stay with my mother? What I cannot understand is why girls and boys are not treated the same. Why would a boy my age get to choose what he wants while I am silenced? Why do I have to listen to something without question, even if it is nonsense?”

The teacher’s action followed the “banking system of education” (Freire, 2003) in which “the educator’s role is to regulate the way the world ‘enters’ into the students” (p. 57). The teacher had complete control over class discussions. The teacher also controlled the manner in which a student was expected to engage in class discussions (DeLuca, 1996). This is what I learned not only “from my first educational encounter with silencing” (p. 143) and being ignored and not given attention for the ideas I had but also in my first educational encounter with gender discourse in my society. For me, this incident was the beginning of my realization that a profound gender inequity exists, which prevails in many practices within Arab Muslim Saudi society and is manifested throughout the education system.

I began noticing that school subjects like history and language rarely included female role models. This was ironic considering the ample number of female Muslim role models in early Islamic history. Yet, history in the higher grades solely focuses on men’s triumphs and is reported from men’s points of view. Hence, education tends to be traditional, with little or no room for innovation, especially with regard to women’s status. The effect of this learning environment is both substantial and noteworthy.

After Grade 10, all students could choose between two streams—social or natural sciences. I had to choose between the social sciences and humanities stream and the natural sciences stream. My choice was science. I had thought that demonstrating curiosity and asking questions in my science classes (i.e., math, physics, chemistry, and biology) would seem reasonable, non-controversial, and therefore bearable to my science teachers—at least more so than they had in my arts and social science classes. My constant wonder about the things that I was taught in social science classes seemed, at least in my teachers’ eyes, horrendous. Ideally, in natural sciences there is always room for wonder and for inquiry. Before long, however, I discovered that the same boundaries that existed in my arts classes also existed in my science classrooms. I wondered how these boundaries were created, and by whom. At that time, it was a difficult question to answer. In the science stream I chose to be creative, but I was disappointed by the limited and inferior scientific equipment, and by the inadequate access to proper laboratory facilities. Our lab periods were short; we received lectures and were not allowed to touch the equipment. The medium of inquiry was, again, lecturing, but instead of having it in the classroom, we received them in the lab where we sat, not in rows of seats, but on benches. Watson describes this kind of learning, which lacks self-reflection, as a “formula approach to people, objectifying, codifying, and reifying human experiences with ‘official knowledge’ that takes on a life of its own—a life that is separate, decontextualized, rather than connected” (as cited in DeLuca, 1996, p. 149).

After Grade 12, I finished my national (a matriculation exam) for high school, and my high marks provided me with entry into any field that I wanted to pursue. As a teenager, I was still fairly unaware of the massive social constraints that I would face if I were to try to fulfill my dreams extending beyond the norm. Indeed, my sensitivity to gender discourse was not yet fully developed. Nevertheless, I intuitively knew that, as a young woman, my choices were restricted and limited. The limitation of women’s professions is pronounced in Saudi society, and I had only two choices: education or medicine. With only two options, I felt like I had no choice. At that time, I had to think not of what I was capable of doing, but of what was socially and culturally available and acceptable. I ended up in teachers’ college, which was not my first choice. The closest medical school was a five-hour drive from my city, and living away from

home at college was not traditionally acceptable for a young woman. Having to live in residence prevented many girls from pursuing their dreams. After a summer-long debate with my father, who insisted that a “good girl” does not live away from her father’s house, I attended my first lecture at the teachers’ college in tears. “The policies and ideologies that permit or disallow female education within any society also affect the entry of women into various professions” (Mohammed, 2003, pp. 106-107). I agree with Farmer (1996) when he stated that “The school community is a microcosm of the world and, as such, models the expectations that society wants students to have in order to participate as adults” (p. 38). Now I understand that not being able to interact with other students, discuss issues, or analyze in the classroom, whether in the sciences or the arts, is a cultural norm. Thus, girls are expected to support the status quo by living close to home and selecting careers acceptable in the wider Saudi society. This is the expectation for girls in wider society.

On a different note, ever since my childhood, I have been attracted to literature. I have a profound interest in languages and literacy. In search of knowledge and literature other than that available in schools, I went from one book store to another, hunting for books by famous Arab authors, but in vain. I searched for literature in my leisure time during summer vacations. The great emphasis on science and mathematics in the school environment meant that I seldom thought of literature in the school context—school was reserved for “serious” and “beneficial” knowledge. As a result, I would read literature only during my free time.

My interest in topics like politics, science, and history—topics that, according to cultural norms, are associated with masculinity—was noticeable to my peers and family. But, I did not feel that my interests were in contradiction to my Islamic identity. Yet, by the age of 15, I had formulated comparatively astute questions about a variety of subjects. I had many questions to which I was unable to find answers in any available book. Also, I had been disinclined to express my views freely in the presence of my parents or my teachers. In Saudi Arabia, I was not free to question school curricula, social dictates, or cultural rules because these are considered sacred.

I was encouraged by my parents, and ironically, especially by my father, to pursue education. I was encouraged to seek education that would not violate the social norms—education that would not require me to mix with men, to travel, and to live alone. Unlike Fadwa, who is one of the Arab Muslim women I knew and interviewed for my study of Muslim women’s educational experiences, I was unable to cross or negotiate traditional boundaries in order to maintain my personal interests.

(8) In many families in Saudi Arabia, young women often were, and still are, convinced or forced to leave school early in order to start a family. Many of my relatives and friends were taken out of school in Grade 10, or before finishing high school, and were forced to marry. Many girls get married after high school or half way through university. The education system prescribes that the purpose of women’s education is to produce good mothers and wives. This is clearly stated as the main goal of women’s education in Saudi Arabia (Al-Hageel, 1993).

(9) The education system in Saudi Arabia fosters a power hierarchy in which men dominate women. For example, the education of women in Saudi Arabia started 34 years after men’s education and has been given secondary importance (Al-Manea, 1984). Decision-making positions at the school board level are restricted to males, and all top positions are assigned to men (AlHasher, 2004). Male perspectives prevail in textbooks, especially in religious ones. Although the school administration—which is female—might not seek to oppress women and girls directly, it makes no effort to change the status quo. Gender ideologies, perpetuated for so

long, have convinced many Saudi women and men that women's nature is different from that of men and that women's education should be limited to what is helpful to women's primary roles as wives and mothers. Therefore, women do not have access to the same jobs as men. This explains why only certain professions (i.e., teaching and nursing, as opposed to engineering) are open to women.

(10) Conforming to gender norms, properly conducting one's self as a woman, and demonstrating "feminine" traits is highly regarded in our native society—*bent al-nas* (see Yamani, 2004), an Arabic term meaning "respectful woman of a good family." In other words, living up to traditional behavior norms, for example, the way women are expected to sit, walk, and talk, is all subsumed under gender discourses. I tried to conform, consciously or unconsciously, to these standards when I lived in Saudi Arabia and also during my short visits home over the past eight years. Yet, "we know that feminine girls sometimes grow up to be unfeminine women; we know that identity is not constant over time" (McQuillan & Pfeiffer, 2001, p. 18).

(11) In almost all Arab Muslim societies, parents have the option of single sex or coeducational schooling with the exception of Saudi Arabia where all schools and universities are segregated by gender (see Hamdan, 2010). Workplaces are also gender segregated, for example, women have their own banks. Saudi Arabia has pervasive gender-segregation rules that have to be maintained at all times. As a Saudi woman I was constrained by a culture that molded me within a conservative upbringing, where female-male interaction is extremely forbidden. In Saudi Arabia, I taught at an all-girls' college for three years.

Purvis's (1981a, 1999) research, based on girls' schooling in Britain, demonstrated that the message parents and girls receive is that females should be prepared for the domestic sphere of the home, while boys should be prepared primarily for activities outside the home, including paid employment. This observation resonates with the way in which girls are raised in almost all social classes in Arab Muslim society, where girls' education, to a large extent, is an indoctrination into the roles of housewives and mothers. This indoctrination takes place explicitly and implicitly through the social and cultural agenda of the curricula, which emphasizes that girls should be confined to the private sphere. Ironically, from my experience as a science teacher in Saudi Arabia and in Canada, the math and science curricula in Saudi schools are more advanced and extensive. Most of the math and science curricula for high schools in Saudi Arabia are adopted from Egyptian curricula and resemble Canadian first-year university courses. This presents some contradictions. Even in less conservative Arab Islamic countries where segregation between the sexes is less pervasive, gender differences are still prevalent.

A study by Mensch, Ibrahim, Lee, and El-Gibaly (2000) in Egypt, where segregation between the sexes is less prevalent, has indicated that there is a pronounced difference in gender roles among Egyptian adolescents, and that neither boys nor girls expressed progressive attitudes regarding gender roles. Thus, co-educational schools do not function in isolation from cultural and social values any more than gender-segregated schools. I argue that sex-segregated schools advance girls' and young women's world-views beyond male/female disciplines and provide "less stereotyped education" (Arnot, 2002, p. 89) in terms of subject choices. Furthermore, Arnot (2002) showed that

In single-sex schools, girls were more likely to take science subjects and boys more likely to choose languages and the arts compared to the students in co-educational schools . . . The tendency was for single-sex schools to weaken the gender patterns of subject choice, particularly as far as girls and science were concerned. These findings were supported by

other pieces of research, such as King's study of mathematics teaching in mixed and single-sex schools and Omerod's study on subject choice. (p. 88)

From my personal experience, and before I came to Canada, I never associated science with maleness or arts and humanities with femaleness. Being in all-girls' schools gives young girls freedom and space to be less concerned about the way that they look. In all-girls' settings, girls can focus on schoolwork, achievements, and competitions rather than on their appearance. Similarly, Arnot (2002) has argued, "the atmosphere, the ideology of teachers and pupils, all contribute to the subordination of girls. In radical feminist views, it is the presence of boys which affects girls' low self-perception, low academic performance, and narrow traditional feminine interests after school" (p. 97).

Another advantage of all-girls' schools, which is supported by the literature, is that they provide female authority role models (i.e., female teachers and administrators). Arnot (2002) said this about all-girls' schools:

With an all-female teaching staff and a female head, girls will perceive that it is not impossible for women to hold power and to enter the male world of science. They will learn to appreciate feminine friendships and a sense of solidarity with each other . . . Through the cultivation of "sisterhood," girls will be able to grow and develop their human potential; they will be in a much stronger position to resist oppression in the wider society. Further, single-sex schools could attempt to counteract the traditional patterns of socialization the girls will have experienced in their homes. (p. 97)

Other researchers have argued for the value of co-educational settings in terms of their influence on the development of girls' self-esteem and confidence. Rosemary Deem (1978) stressed that

The emphasis on academic learning in a single-sex school is not likely to convey to girls the impression that it is unimportant whether girls do well at school or not, a message which may already be conveyed to girls by their socialization and culture and not always contradicted in mixed schools. (p. 75)

In my experience as a student and a teacher in Saudi Arabia, the competition among girls in schools and on school boards (at the local and national level) is intense and emphasizes the importance of academic success, even though this message contradicts many patriarchal cultural practices. Like Mensch et al. (2000), I argue that it seems that the patriarchal cultural practices prevalent in Arab Muslim societies disadvantage even those girls and women who attend sex-segregated schools. Thus, I agree with Arnot (2002) when she stated:

Sex segregation through schooling will not blur or eliminate the boundary between girls and boys but will allow girls to find their self-confidence and to learn how to challenge patriarchal relations. On the one hand, the absence of boys and their jokes, their ridicule of girls, their absorption of the teachers, their competitive spirit and their aggression and, on the other hand, the cultivation of feminist consciousness within all-girls' schools lead to support the principle of sex segregation. (p. 97)

Since I have always attended all-girls' schools, I can testify that the confidence and self-assertion that these schools develop in girls might be attributable to their single-sex schooling. Yet, single-sex schooling alone will not solve either patriarchy or sexism, both of which are deeply rooted in the culture. Sarah, Scott, and Spender (1980) assume that

Universal single-sex education for girls would completely resolve the problem of sexism in education but, in an age where co-education is heralded as a symbol of progress, it must be made clear that while it may represent progress for boys, for girls it represents a defeat rather than an advance. (p. 70)

In contrast to the assumptions made by Sarah et al. (1980), I acknowledge that single-sex progressive schooling might be a first step toward girls questioning the status quo of a culture that consistently reinforces messages of women's inferiority within social and public spheres. Some of the literature I have examined has vigorously expressed the authors' opposition to the idea that all-girls' schools are a better option for girls. Thus, there is a great diversity of values and opinions regarding the relative merits of single-sex and co-educational schooling.

(12) I have wrestled with how to interpret and construct my environment at different points in my life, particularly during times of transition or change (such as when I moved to Canada). I draw from my personal experiences as a Muslim Saudi woman who grew up and completed undergraduate studies in a conservative, patriarchal society. My gender has been constructed by my Islamic faith and by the Arab culture of Saudi Arabia. I read and memorized the Holy *Quran* from a very young age. The *Quranic* text does not contradict scientific discourse, which I found fascinating. Furthermore, the *Quran's* teaching to women contradicts some cultural traditional practices and patriarchal societal norms. For instance, while I found that the *Quran* supports leadership roles for women, powerful male elites in most Arab Muslim societies prevent women from exercising that very right. In addition, while female genital mutilation is a cultural practice that has no basis in the *Quran* or in the Prophet's teaching, Peace be Upon Him, it is perpetuated by cultural traditions in the name of Islamic teachings to women.

In Saudi Arabia, I questioned the contradictions that I perceived between the *Quran* on the one hand and the patriarchal cultural traditions and societal norms that I experienced on the other hand. These cultural traditions and practices were imposed, justified, and carried on in Saudi society and continue to prevail today as a result of the hegemony of male power. Some cultural traditions and practices have prevailed by keeping women illiterate. If women are illiterate, they are unlikely to discover their rights and responsibilities in light of Islamic teachings. "If Islam gives rights to women, it remains that they [women] need to know these rights in order to defend them" (Ramadan, 2001, p. 55). This puts a great emphasis on education and the ability to think critically.

(13) I feel comfortable identifying with the term "feminist." I perceive "feminism" as the name of a movement that aims to raise women's awareness about their inherent rights. I do not associate "feminism" with the West or the East but view it as a concept that can be found and applied to any and all cultures. For me, feminism is not merely about certain choices we make; I see feminism in a broader sense, as being concerned with the freedom to make choices. Like Sophie Harding (2000), I feel that "[my] definition of feminism does not come from books or a particular movement. It comes from a society; it comes from an ancestry and a bloodline of women who are not children of the Western-feminist movement" (p. 11).

My feminism originates from my experience. I lived within gender-specific boundaries. The way I was raised reinforced my curiosity and outspoken personality; yet, school and wider cultural experiences have emphasized the fact that I am female and, thus, "secondary" to men. When I lived in Saudi Arabia, other women's struggles led me to reflect deeply about the roots of inequality and male patriarchy. Like Chaudhry (1997), I did not even know or understand feminism before coming to Canada. As Chaudhry states:

The continual insistence by some of these women that my family was more oppressive than theirs because my mother did not finish high school or because I did not even know what feminism was before I came to the U.S. did not detract from my realization of the value of the resistance enacted by me or my mother . . . . I just needed to figure out a way to talk about the contextual nature of resistance and oppression.” (p. 449)

This is a process that is vital in feminism. On a more profound level, I attribute my feminism to the *Quranic* messages that I have learned since childhood—most important, the message that God is fair and just. How then could God treat women with injustice and unfairness? The teachings of Islam have strongly influenced my perceptions toward my role in this life. I have never viewed my role as having less value than that of a man. Furthermore, I am indebted to my education in Canada for having exposed me to feminist theories.

(14) I acknowledge the difficulties involved in order for women to gain access to leadership positions in Canada. In Arab Muslim cultures, leadership is always a male enterprise, especially in the religious realm. Some Muslims argue that women are not necessarily suitable for political and religious leadership positions simply because they are women. Their argument is based on the same premise used by some traditional Muslim scholars, both male and female:

It is argued that women undergo menstruation, child bearing and labor—a fact which may hamper their performance in the council to which they are elected. But this can be refuted by saying that men also may be subject to misjudgment or illness which may impair their performance. (The Muslim Brotherhood, as cited in Mooney, 1998, p. 99)

By advocating that it is incompatible with women’s nature to be in leadership positions, traditional male and female Muslim scholars are overlooking many indisputable facts and examples confirming the status of women as leaders and active participants in a variety of domains during the early Islamic era. I argue that the feminism of early Islamic women “is understood better as the achievement of a space for themselves, for autonomy, and a career in a culture that inconsistently forbids and permits professional autonomy and women’s caring role” (Vidyasagar & Rea, 2004, p. 265).

(15) According to Hessini (1994), the viewpoint of some Muslim women in Middle Eastern societies is that equality between the sexes destabilizes and dehumanizes women and undermines the collaborative relations between men and women. The opponents of complete equality between the sexes usually advocate the complementarity between the sexes.

(16) Women of high status, because of education or social class, are the least desired by Arab Muslim men. Many men in Saudi Arabia prefer to marry women 18 to 22 years old, regardless of their own age. Also, a man who grows up in a patriarchal society where he is superior to women might be threatened by a woman who has higher status and greater power than he does. Ahmad’s (2001) study indicates a similar finding:

Some women expressed concerns that degree status might limit future marriage prospects, because of increasing age. There were also concerns that women may become “too educated” to find husbands who were either of a similar stature, or who would welcome a wife with an equal, or higher, qualification level. (p. 147)

(17) Since moving to Canada, my faith has deepened. I was a practising Muslim in Saudi Arabia, but my spirituality has grown since the move. Being away from my predominantly Muslim home country, I began to question which aspects of my spiritual beliefs and practices were cultural and

which were religious. I started to reflect on and think about the gender question. Reading a variety of interpretations of the *Quranic* verses, especially those pertaining to women by well-known female and male Muslim scholars—many books about Islam and *Quranic* interpretations are accessible and available in Canada and the US—has led me to believe that my faith is not rigid toward women but flexible instead. My deep knowledge of the religious texts, as well as my faith, allowed me to question and challenge certain regimented rules imposed on women. Women's ignorance of their rights leads to their abuse and neglect in societies where they live; thus, "it is only from a position of knowledge that women can claim their rights and contest patriarchal interpretations of Islam" (Hashim, 1999, p. 12). This personal and spiritual growth could also be attributed to the personal maturity that I have developed since I came to Canada in my early twenties.

While growing up in Saudi Arabia, my favourite childhood playmates and elder role models were males. My pre-teen association with boys caused me some trouble with my family. I realized by the age of 15 that I was not supposed to talk, play, or associate with males, whether they were relatives or not. As an adult, and before moving to Canada, I did not have the opportunity to interact with males because of Saudi's social law (e.g., schools, universities, parks, and banks are all segregated by sex).

In Arab Muslim tradition, it is believed that the mingling of males and females could lead to *fitna*, which means moral and social misconduct. *Fitna* has many meanings in the various texts, such as female desirability, female power, male weakness, and social chaos and social disorder. Its implications for women as a gender group are that they are seemingly quantifiably less intelligent than men, and physically weaker and prone to emotional instability. In the modern Islamic world, women's bodies and beauty are seen as great temptations to weak men who cannot curb their desires. Women are temptresses who have more sexual power than men. Women are therefore burdened with the responsibility of controlling male desire, thereby saving their community from *fitna*. Men are almost powerless when it comes to female sexuality in this portrayal (Leo, 2005, p. 135). *Fitna* means causing chaos or disruption and it is particularly used to refer to chaos in the socio-political order in the event that a woman has any public role (Shaikh, 2004, p.101). *Fitna* refers to the danger inherent in female beauty and nature. For instance, the notion that a woman is a destructive sexual creature or that "a woman running for office may use her physical attributes of beauty and so forth to gain more votes" (Amawi, 1996, p. 153) is firmly implanted in many people's perceptions. Al-Tabari, a well-known Muslim historian, voices his conviction:

Female sexual desire is a potential source of danger to men—it will cause them to sin because it will come between them and God. It must, therefore, be punished. Only when satisfied within the bonds of marriage is female sexual desire redeemable and, indeed, rewarded, bringing happiness and sons to man. What more could a good woman want? (as cited in Leo, 2005, p. 137)

(18) Regardless of my origins, my views are like those of Abdo (2002) who said that her views have been "honed and shaped in the West [particularly in Canada] where I have been exposed to a largely Western model of feminism" (Abdo, 2002, p. 229). This exposure opens doors for me to search for Arab Muslim feminist ideologies. These ideologies, books, and publications of Arab Muslim feminist scholars (e.g., Ahmed, 1992, 1999; El Saadawi, 1999) and researchers were not accessible to me as I grew up in Saudi Arabia. Upon revisiting my insider-outsider status, I acknowledge my privilege as an Arab Muslim woman pursuing higher education; my insider-outsider status is simultaneously re-emphasized.

I am mindful of the fact that “inappropriate Western feminist paradigms are often applied to the Arab world, even by Arab women scholars themselves” (Abdo, 2002, p. 229). This includes the Western colonial discourse, which some Western feminists use to “devalue local cultures by presuming that there is only one path for emancipating women [which is by] adopting Western Models” (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 14). I use my heightened awareness of these pitfalls to avoid imposing Western paradigms. My awareness of my privilege as an insider-outsider cautions me “not to *simplify* [emphasis added] any or all of the factors [affecting Arab Muslim women’s lives] into clichés, such as the Arab woman’s total oppression under Islam” (Abdo, 2002, p. 229).

(19) The freedom of choice and expression that I enjoy in the Canadian context is most intriguing. In Arab Muslim societies, many people are controlled by social laws and cultural traditions as well as by the political agendas of the states in which they live. In other words, many Arab Muslim people in the Canadian context are free to practise their faith without the social pressure that dictates certain norms and portrays them as essential aspects of the Islamic faith. Having the space to question some patriarchal cultural norms without societal pressure is possible in Canada, but such questioning is difficult in our native societies. I presume that Islam is a lived and enjoyed reality for many Muslims in North America (Nimer, 2002). In Canada, for instance, many Arab Muslim people choose to practise their faith and it is not forced upon them.

(20) My move to Canada has helped me to assert my Islamic identity, unlike Shahjahan (2004) who, after coming to Canada, hardly spoke of his Islamic identity. In fact, he felt that part of him was being silenced, and he did not have a sense of belonging within Canadian academic discourse. As a Muslim woman, observing the *hijab*, I am identified easily as a Muslim. People on many occasions have asked me questions about my *hijab* and my faith, which I am delighted to talk about. Although the media continues to depict Muslims as “fanatical,” “dangerous,” and the “other,” I am able to help create a different perspective on Muslims through my academic and personal life. For instance, through my Master’s work, PhD research, conference presentations, and scholarly publications, I provide an alternative way to view Muslims, particularly women. Being part of Canadian academic discourses, where the opportunity to present one’s voice is available, I am able to assert my worldviews. This opportunity, combined with my spirituality, though challenging at times, has helped me to overcome barriers in order to attain my goals.

In studying the *Quran*, I agree with Iman Hashim (1999) that “I am now in a position to oppose patriarchal interpretations and to challenge others when debates are foreclosed on the bases of my gender, which is remarkably liberatory” (p.13). Nonetheless, Iman and Eman, who are Muslim women who were interviewed in one of my studies about Arab Muslim women’s educational experiences, along with myself and other Muslim women who currently live outside Arab Muslim societies, must acknowledge our privilege because we are, to a large extent, untouched by the strict interpretations of Islam that are prevalent, practised, and imposed in many Arab Muslim societies. Hashim (1999) continues:

I can only imagine the constraints facing women in other socio-geographical locations. It is important to be aware of the problems of advocating the dissemination and adoption of egalitarian interpretations, and not to underestimate the dangers involved in contesting patriarchal interpretations of Islam. (p. 13)

My ability as a Muslim woman to deepen my faith in a secular society is made salient through the narratives. That Canada allows the freedom and space for one to practice his or her own religion freely is advantageous. This freedom is a source of confidence for new immigrants. Having mosques where Muslims go to pray in many Canadian provinces is empowering to Muslims who come from all parts of the world.

I am untroubled by the opposing beliefs embedded in Arab Muslim cultural, traditional and religious teachings, and Canadian values. I have experienced and/or am experiencing the differences between the lifestyles of the Arab Muslim nations and Canada, especially with respect to gender identities. Ginsburg and Tsing (1990) state that

An individual's position in a web of intersecting inequalities has too often been interpreted, and experienced, as paralyzing; yet an awareness of this complexity can also be politically empowering as it suggests new modes of self-respect and alliance . . . that both women's and men's identities are not characterized by singularity and coherency, but are, in fact, "fragmented, multi-faceted and shift in different contexts." (pp. 5-9)

Thus, I argue that multiculturalism encourages women of different cultural backgrounds to develop a sense of a new hybrid identity (Markovic & Manderson, 2002). According to Bhabha (1990), "All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity . . . hybridity is the third space which enables other positions to emerge . . . sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives . . . a new era of negotiation of meaning and representation" (p. 207). I am able to overcome any contradictions that may arise between Islamic Arabic values and Canadian values. Chaudhry expressed what it is like for me being Muslim and Arab in Canada in her description of how women

have forged hybrid identities in response to their experiences and interactions with changing contextual realities within formal educational as well as community contexts. Using the margins as sites of resistance, these women deployed their hybrid identities and world-views to enact resistance against oppressive power relations in various contexts resulting in empowerment. (Chaudhry, 1997, p. 451)

I suggest that my autobiographical accounts have displayed the following characteristics within my narrative inquiry.

### **Conclusion**

I have highlighted the above episodes as significant in the formation of my view that autoethnography is an educational resource and a source of privileged knowledge that ought to be shared with others. As Vygotsky (1987) explains, an autoethnography is an inner speech in which "the word is much more heavily laden with sense than it is in external speech . . . it is a concentrated clot of sense. To translate this meaning into that language of external speech, it must be expanded into a whole panorama of words. It is speech for oneself" (p. 278).

To me autoethnography is the process of trying to narrate one's own voice—a voice coming from within, from one's soul. It is the process of making that voice available to others who are interested in viewing the world from a different perspective and through a different lens. I have shared sections of my personal narratives in order to demonstrate how the autobiographical accounts of a researcher can be viewed as a source of privileged knowledge. Researcher narratives and autobiographical accounts can provide educational experiences for others. I argue that researcher autoethnography is useful for explaining, illustrating, and connecting personal experiences to identity claims. Through exploring others' narratives, one can deconstruct myths about unfamiliar terrain and explore alternative readings. One may also juxtapose one's views about a particular group of people or a particular historical incident with an autobiographical account or a version of an event from an insider perspective. This could thereby emancipate one's views and/or misconceptions of the unfamiliar.

In my experience, some of my views have shifted and have been modified as a result of reading an insider's account – an autoethnography. As Plummer (1995) vividly suggests, stories gather people around them (p. 174), dialectically connecting people (Riessman, 2001, p. 3). In short, to those hesitant researchers, I repeat the opinion that “For narratives to flourish there must be a community to hear . . . for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity, their politics” (Plummer, 1995, 87).

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